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Review by **Sean Fear**, Cornell University

Recent scholarship on the Viet Minh struggle against France has shed new light on the conflict by expanding its focus beyond Vietnam's boundaries, highlighting the regional and even global dimensions of the war.¹ Perhaps the most important dividend brought about by this approach has been an increased understanding of the extent of Chinese support for Vietnam's nascent army, which enabled the Viet Minh to effectively counter increasing American assistance to France. In "A Border Region 'Exuded With Militant Friendship': Provincial Narratives of China's Participation in the First Indochina War, 1949–1954," Charles Kraus joins a growing list of scholars including Chen Jian, Qiang Zhai, and Yang Kuisong, among others, whose work has demonstrated that previously overlooked Chinese contributions proved decisive.² But while these studies have thus far focused primarily on decision-making in Beijing, Kraus instead concentrates on China's southern frontier provinces, an approach, he contends, which reveals a far more substantial commitment than has been previously assumed. This in turn prompts a

¹ Examples include *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis*. Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall eds. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007; Stein Tonnesson. *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010; Christopher Goscha. *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of Vietnamese Revolution 1885-1954*. Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999; Mark Atwood Lawrence. *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005.

² Chen Jian. *Mao's China and the Cold War*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001; Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000; Yang Kuisong. "Changes in Mao Zedong's Attitude toward the Indochina War, 1949-1973," *Cold War International History Project Working Paper no. 34*. *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*, February, 2002

proposal that China's Cold War foreign policy be "reassess[ed] ...within the context of border provinces and localities" (495). Though Kraus ultimately fails in some ways to deliver the ambitious results promised by his methodology, he nonetheless adds detail to our understanding early Cold War Sino-Vietnamese relations, and suggests a potentially rewarding avenue for further research progress.

The foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 1 October 1949 was of critical importance to the Vietnamese Communists, who for years had struggled to secure international recognition and support.³ Having already dispatched representatives north after learning of People's Liberation Army (PLA) victories via French radio, Ho Chi Minh personally followed suit in January 1950, at a time when Beijing's control over the border had yet to be consolidated. Arriving in the Chinese capital, Ho found his Chinese counterparts amenable to his requests for increased assistance, marking the beginning of an alliance that would ultimately shift the balance in the war against France. In the years that followed, the PRC provided weapons, military training, food supplies for combat operations and famine relief, medical equipment and expertise, consumer goods, and even funding for Vietnamese diplomatic offices and activities north of the border.

Contributions to education were particularly noteworthy, Kraus observes, with local officials working to accommodate the thousands of Vietnamese students who crossed the border during this time, a reflection of the "diversity and extent of Vietnamese residing in China in the early 1950s [which] ...previous scholarship has underestimated" (505). In addition to the Vietnamese Military Academy (*Yunnan lujun xuexiao*) that was established in Yunnan in April 1950 (and moved to Guangxi in 1954), schools were also established in the cities of Nanning, Guilin and Lushan, with dormitory construction, teachers' salaries, meals and students' expenses all subsidized by the PRC.

Responsibility for organizing, implementing, and most notably, financing China's impressive commitment to aiding Vietnam fell primarily to provincial authorities, demonstrating that officials in the Southwest "were at the forefront of China's involvement in the First Indochina War" (507). And in light of such significant regional participation, Kraus argues, "the view from Beijing alone does not suffice, and, indeed, often conceals much about the development and extent of China's foreign relations during the Cold War" (507). But while the piece describes some potential benefits of an increased focus on local actors, more effort is required to provide a sense of what the "view" from outside the capital may have looked like, especially given that Kraus demonstrates that much of the impetus for supporting Vietnam came from the Central Committee, and above all, from the Vietnamese themselves. Determined to shape their own destiny in spite of their reliance on external assistance, Vietnamese representatives

³ See for instance Christopher Goscha, "Courting Diplomatic Disaster? The Difficult Integration of Vietnam into the International Communist Movement (1945-1950)." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 1, 1-2 (2006).

took the initiative in establishing diplomatic offices in Southern China (funded by local officials at the behest of the Central Committee); in lobbying Beijing to provide weapons and other supplies; and in requesting training for the thousands of Vietnamese students and soldiers who crossed the border, often arriving unexpectedly and forcing the Central Committee's hand. Even the suggestion that authorities in Guangdong, Guangxi and Yunnan should bear the brunt of these expenses apparently originated with Ho Chi Minh (498).

Eager to support their southern ally for a number of reasons, China's leaders proved increasingly receptive to Ho's requests. Kraus reveals that commitments to allocate provincial funds for Vietnamese diplomacy, material support, and education were made at Beijing's behest. Given that the Central Committee appears to have determined the nature and the scope of Chinese aid to Vietnam before devolving the cost onto the provinces, it remains unclear from this account whether regional contributions to the war were reflections of comradely solidarity or merely the execution of orders. Indeed, several episodes hint at local resentment of apparently extravagant demands from above, implying a degree of reluctance to support Vietnam or submit to Beijing's commands that, in either case, demands a more thorough investigation. Though Kraus notes (citing a Vietnamese source) that "[Chinese] provincial officials sometimes complained that they were funding the activities of a foreign government," (501) he rarely elaborates on this claim, describing resistance in Yunnan against orders to contribute grain and advanced weapons for instance, but providing little analysis of any broader implications. Provincial views on major themes such as international proletarian solidarity, the state of Sino-Vietnamese relations, or federal-provincial tensions, among other possibilities, remain largely speculative, and readers hoping to learn more about Sino-Vietnamese tensions during this time as described in other works will be disappointed.⁴

This relative absence of regional perspectives may in part be explained by the selection of sources; noting that "the Chinese sources consulted ...largely obscured incidences of conflict or strife," Kraus instead relies heavily on Chinese-language secondary-source material and the papers of high-ranking officials, in particular the decidedly non-provincial Liu Shaoqi, then Vice-Chairman of the PRC. Given that provincial archives have long served as a treasure trove for China historians forced to work around previous restrictions on access to collections in Beijing, a more complete analysis of the attitudes and motives of regional officials may well be possible, thus increasing the value of a promising new approach to an already thoroughly examined conflict.

In any case, though his piece does not completely deliver on its promise, Kraus nonetheless suggests a new and valuable context from which to understand the First

⁴ Qiang Zhai, for instance, reveals that Chinese General Chen Geng, for example, using the words "slippery and not very upright and honest" to describe his Vietnamese counterpart Vo Nguyen Giap, who in turn complained of excessive Chinese criticism. Zhai, 64.

H-Diplo Article Review

Indochina War, which is all the more welcome at a time when looking within rather than beyond national borders has become increasingly overlooked as a means of pursuing diplomatic history.

Sean Fear is a doctoral candidate at Cornell University. His interests include American foreign policy and Vietnamese history, and his dissertation focuses on U.S.-South Vietnamese relations following the 1968 Tet Offensive.

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